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Addressing Commanders' Needs for Information on "Soft" Factors

There is growing recognition within the Army and Joint world that recent U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan—including information operations and influence operations—have turned in large measure on an understanding of “soft” factors. However, along with this recognition have come many questions, including: How do commanders view their requirements for “cultural preparation of the environment”? How can these sorts of factors be considered more systematically in planning and conducting operations?

A recent RAND Arroyo Center study sought to characterize commanders' requirements for information on “soft” factors, and to develop practical ways for commanders to integrate influence activities into combined arms planning and assessment. The research entailed structured conversations with commanders and their staffs, a review of senior commanders' and other writings, an analysis of task lists, and an assessment of relevant data from the 1st Information Operations Command and the National Training Center.

Commanders' Information Needs for Influence Operations

Arroyo's review provided a number of insights into commanders' information requirements for influence operations. In this study, the term “influence operations” is used to refer to any operations, including information operations, that involve communications and interactions to inform and influence target audiences in concert with other activities.

- **Commanders' most critical information need is to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and mood of the local civilian populations.** Understanding the popular mood requires continuous monitoring of key indicators, perhaps more so in Muslim societies that are innately suspicious of the West and the United States.

Key Points

- **Commanders' most critical information need in counterinsurgency operations is to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and mood of the local civilian populations.**
- **Commanders who believed their influence operations had been successful had a clear picture of the key influence variables, available resources, and the desired end state.**
- **Developing good measures of effectiveness to assess the effectiveness of influence operations remains a challenge.**
- **To address commanders' needs for information, the Army should collect and analyze geospatial, network oriented, and individual- and group-focused information.**
- **Success in influence operations depends on commanders' understanding of the battle space and of how to employ influence operations to achieve the desired end state.** In addition, commanders who insist that their subordinates develop a coordinated program of influence operations activities and who follow up to ensure that they take place appear far more likely to succeed in integrating influence operations with other combined arms operations.
- **Many sources of information can be drawn upon to accurately assess the local information environment.** The most appropriate sources will vary according to the mission, the local context of the operation, and even the individual commander. It is important, in any case, to establish a clear information sourcing strategy early on.

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- **Commanders who believed their influence operations had been successful had a clear picture of the key influence variables, available resources, and the desired end state.** In contrast, commanders who tried to monitor too many variables, who shifted resources back and forth in response to daily crises, or who changed themes and messages randomly appear to have enjoyed less success.
- **There is currently a lack of good measures of effectiveness (MOEs) to assess how a unit's influence efforts are being received by the local population.** However, three key indicators are being used across units and echelons in Iraq and Afghanistan with some success: the tenor of sermons in mosques, the “on the street” behavior of locals (e.g., obscene gestures toward U.S. troops, amount of anti-American graffiti), and trends in the number of intelligence tips from the local population.

A Framework for Thinking About Commanders' Information Requirements

Commanders' needs for information generally flow from an interaction of factors within three principal arenas: commanders' guidance regarding the overall mission, the resources available to the commander, and the operating environment. In terms of commanders' guidance, influence operations planning should flow from the top down while also ensuring that units in the field have the authority and flexibility they need to be responsive to quickly developing opportunities and challenges. A commander must also understand the full range of available resources, including those under his immediate command, as well as those available from other sources.

Understanding the operating environment, especially the information domain, is more complex. Arroyo developed a framework for thinking about commanders' information requirements in COIN and stability operations, and for guiding data-collection efforts related to the information domain. The framework uses three complementary “lenses” to characterize and diagnose features of the operating environment's information domain.

- **Geospatial.** The geospatial lens captures a number of critically important features of the information domain.

These features range from mostly static features of the terrain (such as urbanization, land use, and transportation networks) to more dynamic features of the environment (such as the changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a given population in a specific region, and the ever-changing mix of new messages and information competing for attention at any given time).

- **Network-oriented.** A second lens involves overlapping or interlocking networks. This lens provides a view of key features of the broader political society, including key leaders, their critical relationships (both formal and informal), and their sources of authority, power, and influence.
- **Political or military stakeholder groups and their leaders.** Another lens involves identifying which groups or individuals need to be targeted, and whether targeting them means informing, influencing, cultivating, or incapacitating them. Each group or faction should be characterized in terms of its group identity and general worldview, as well as its specific aims, grievances, motivations, intentions, morale, basic strategies, leadership, and organizational structure.

Remaining Challenges

The research team identified several emerging challenges that need to be addressed:

- Integrating planning, execution, assessment, and information flows between echelons.
- Coordinating and integrating influence operations across adjacent areas of operation.
- Ensuring continuity in information and influence operations across rotations.
- Overcoming doctrinal stovepipes that tend to treat influence operations and its related and supporting capabilities as discrete, somewhat isolated disciplines.

Addressing these challenges, if coupled with educational and training programs that teach soldiers how to integrate influence efforts with other activities, could give the next generation of Army commanders the tools they need to plan and execute more effective influence operations. ■

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Understanding Commanders' Information Needs for Influence Operations*, by Eric V. Larson, Richard E. Darilek, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Forrest E. Morgan, Brian Nichiporuk, Diana Dunham-Scott, Cathryn Quantic Thurston, and Kristin J. Leuschner, MG-656-A, 2009 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG656.html>). Related research includes *Foundations of Effective Influence Operations: A Framework for Enhancing Army Capabilities*, by Eric V. Larson, Richard E. Darilek, Daniel Gibran, Brian Nichiporuk, Amy Richardson, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Cathryn Quantic Thurston, MG-654-A, 2009 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG654.html>) and *Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis*, by Eric V. Larson, Derek Eaton, Brian Nichiporuk, and Thomas S. Szayna, MG-668-A, 2008 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG668.html>). This research brief was written by Kristin J. Leuschner. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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